

EPA defends work schedule during CAG meeting

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Western News Publisher

EPA crews are working as fast as possible to accommodate homeowners and businessowners with complaints about leaking vermiculite insulation, said cleanup coordinator Jim Christiansen Thursday night at the monthly Community Advisory Group meeting.

EPA workers have surveyed about 1,000 properties, about one-third of the

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way through the screening area of 120 square miles in and around Libby. Government workers have been denied access to 50-60 properties but Christiansen has been visiting with those property owners.

Twenty percent of the homes screened thus far have Zonolite Attic

Insulation and 40 percent have visual vermiculite on their property, mostly in gardens, Christiansen said.

He estimated about 700 homes will be found to have vermiculite either inside as insulation or outside in the garden when screening is completed. He expects the percentage of homes and buildings with ZAI to drop as crews move outside the city limits.

Vermiculite in yards and gardens is running higher than early estimates, he

said. However, the yard vermiculite is easier to clean, he added.

Some CAG members expressed concerns with the cleanup not covering a wide enough area and the work not being done.

"We're getting dozens of calls a day from people that vermiculite is leaking out of ceilings and walls and we are responding," Christiansen said. "But

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we are struggling with the question of what to do with Zonolite in walls.

"It's fundamentally impossible for me to clean every wall in Libby in which Zonolite is trickling out."

Christiansen continued, "It's not a problem anyone has dealt with before."

The EPA is working with contractors and abatement experts on how to approach the problem, he said.

Also, the EPA is committed to completing the cleanup on the bulk of the houses within two years, he said.

"We're going to do what's never been done here in Libby," he continued. "The best I've done - I have a large award on my wall for it - is 150 houses in one year."

The EPA is committed to the governor's request that the cleanup be quick, Christiansen said. But he will not trade quality of work or safety for speed.

Work is continuing on the final stages of screening plant cleanup and creek design work for Rainy Creek is under way.

Christiansen is not sure what is holding up transfer of the planer and dismantling of its old building at the former export plant site.